

Early Television for Iowa's Children

by Becky Wilson Hawbaker

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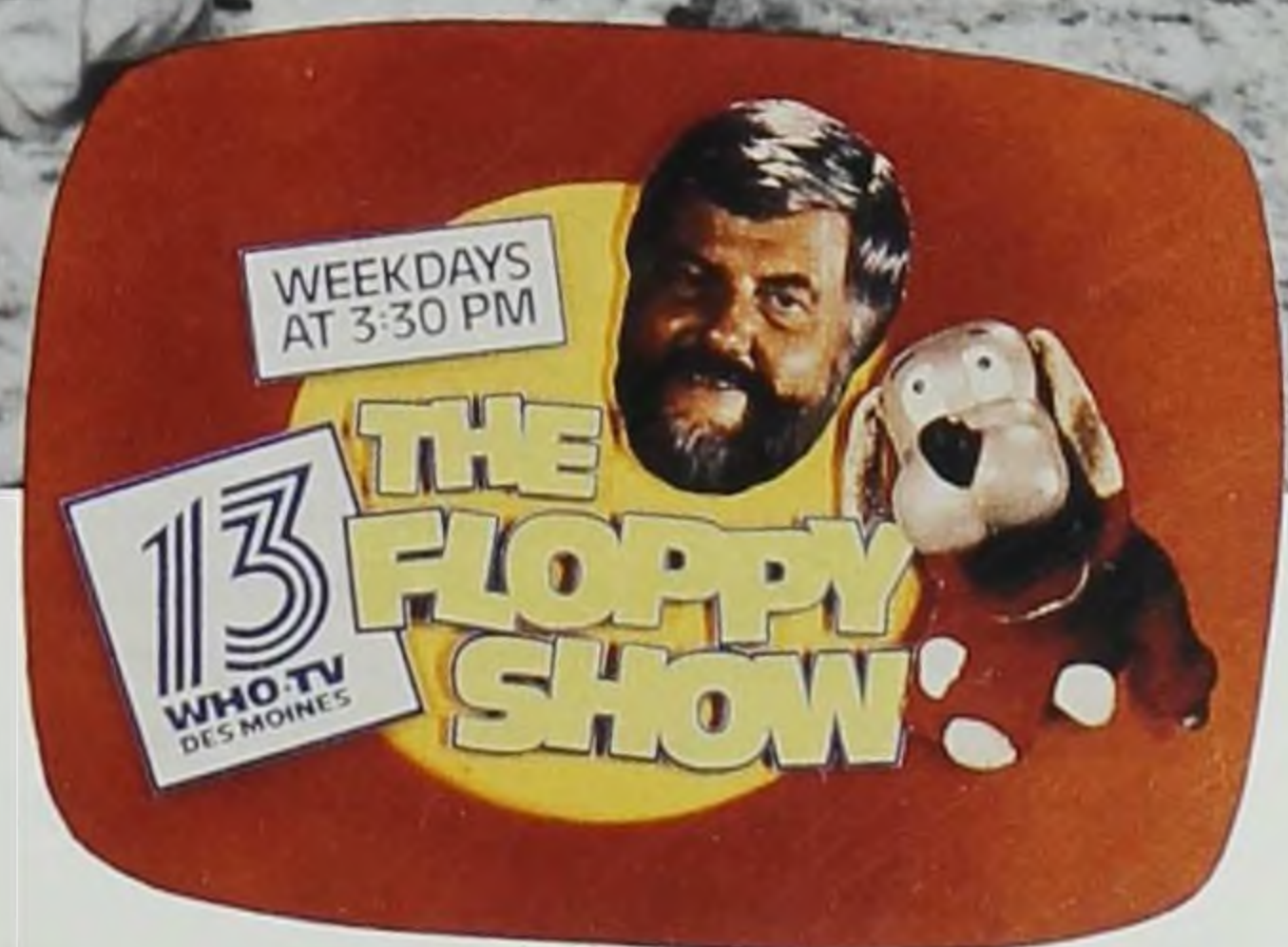
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Duane Ellett and Floppy (back right) pose with guests January 3, 1978, on set used from 1976 through 1982. Dog mask (lower left) was a Floppy souvenir from the show and State Fair. "TV screen" sign promoted Ellett's popular kids' show on WHO-TV.



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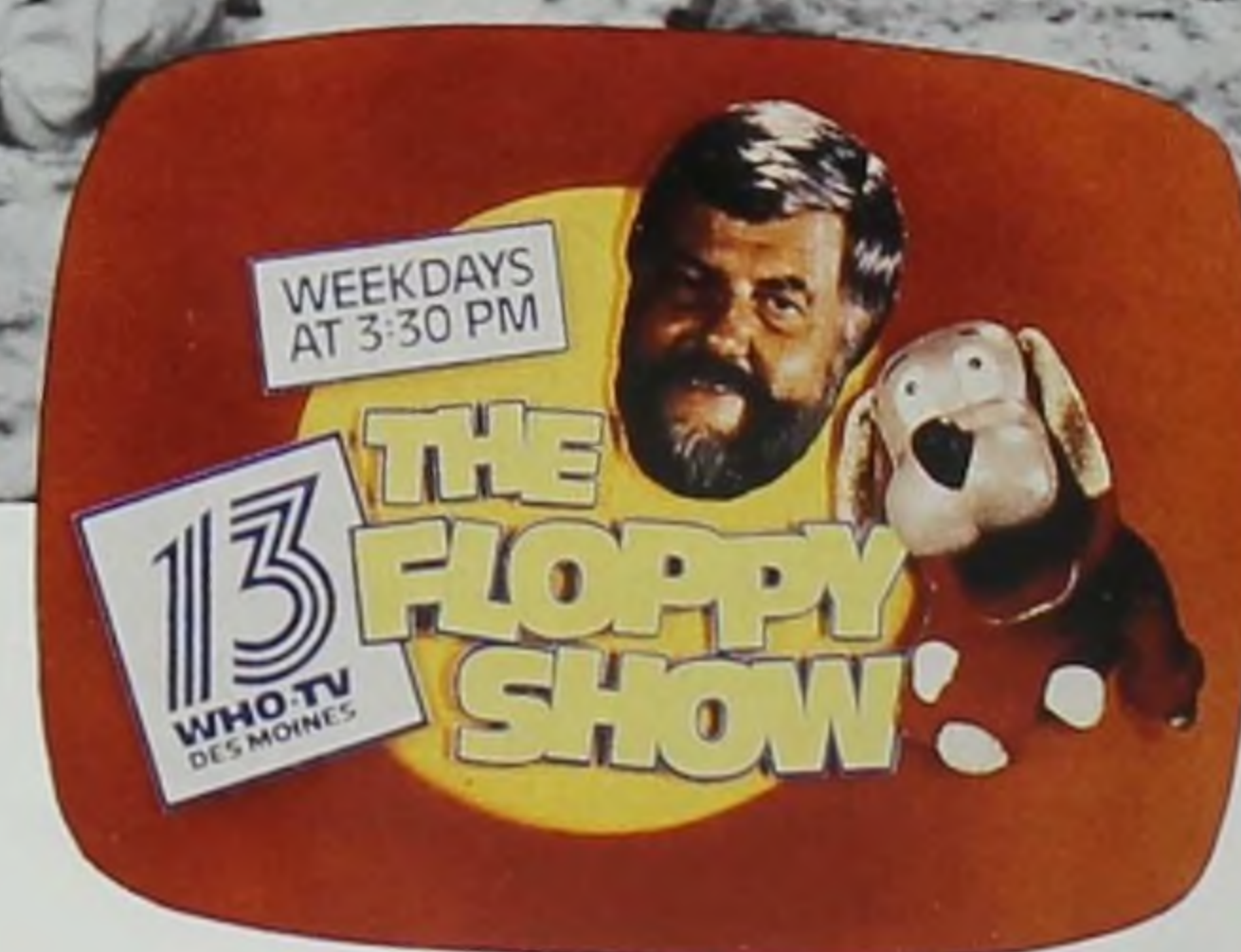
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al cartoon shows broadcast by WHO-TV in Des Moines from 1957 to 1987, and friends and heroes to thousands of Iowa children who watched the shows after school and on weekends. *The Floppy Show* is one example among many children's television programs produced in Iowa beginning in the 1950s, including *The House with the Magic Window* and *Canyon Kid*. These local shows shared common characteristics, yet were unique expressions of larger trends, and they captured the hearts of thousands of Iowa children and adults.

A GENERATION before this visit to see Floppy, television was in its infancy in Iowa. In the early 1950s, for example Woodrow and Kathryn Wilson were the first on their block in Perry, Iowa, to purchase a television set, ensuring instant popularity for their children. Although the children's viewing was restricted (their Aunt Helen thought that shows like *Superman* were "against God"), the now-adult Wilson children recall with nostalgia and surprising detail the shows they grew up with, and can remember all the words to the *Howdy Doody* theme song. Forty years have not dimmed Iowans' memories of early television.

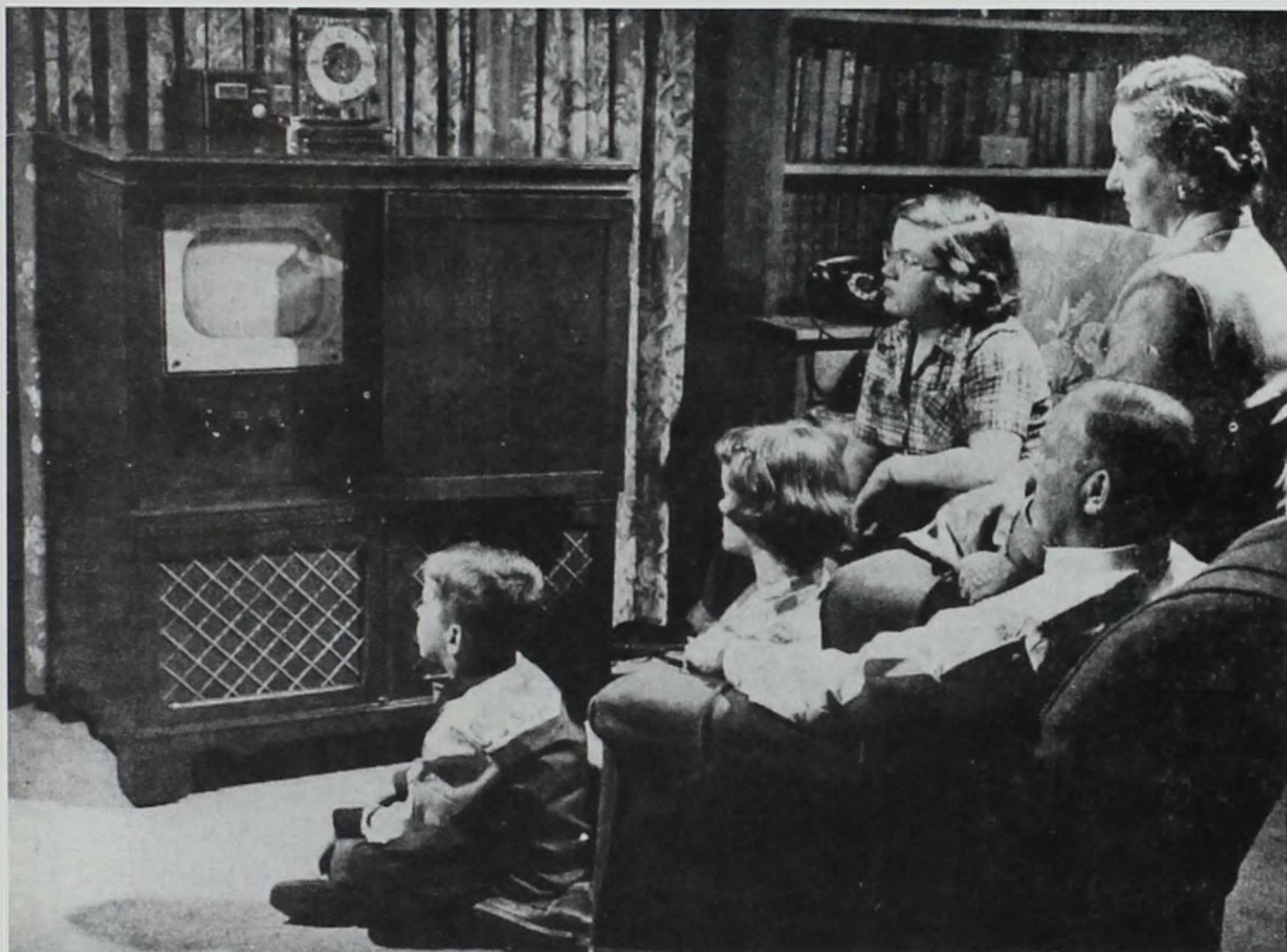
There were an estimated 7 million televisions in America in 1950, with 13,000 in the Omaha/Council Bluffs area, 6,344 in the Davenport area, and 3,500 in central Iowa, according to surveyed distributors. At that time, most Iowans could tune in to only one or two stations, including WOC-TV in Davenport, KMTV and WOW-TV in Omaha/Council Bluffs, and WOI-TV in Ames (which first broadcast in 1949 and 1950). Occasionally—on a clear night when the antenna was in just the right position—Iowans could receive transmissions from stations further away (Kansas City or Minneapolis, for example). Although a number of Iowa investment groups clamored for a piece of the television action, they were thwarted for several years by a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) freeze on approval of station applications until the FCC could set uniform standards and resolve technical issues.

The 1950s are often referred to as the "Golden Age" of television—a time of experimentation and excitement for both broadcasters and those receiving the broadcasts on national and local levels. Local Iowa stations followed at least one important lesson already learned by national networks: Children were an important group of television viewers, and programs aimed at children were a necessary component of any broadcast schedule. Across the nation, as new local stations began broadcasting, nearly each and every one developed some kind of children's show. As they did, they imitated the success of nationally televised children's shows like *Howdy Doody*, *Small Fry Club*, and *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie*.

At the same time, local stations were constrained by the economic forces inherent in commercial broadcasting. As Jack Kuney, director of several nationally televised children's shows, reflected, "There were no lines drawn that made the ground rules for kids' programming any different than they were for

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12.		
8:55-News	4:00-Guest of Honor	1
9:00-Ding Dong	4:15-Gabby Hayes	1
School	4:30-Strike it Rich	1
9:30-Ask Washington	5:00-Magic Window	1
10:00-Schooltime	5:15-Beal Clock	1
10:30-United Nations	5:45-Televisit	1
11:00-Bride & G'm	6:00-Capt. Video	1
11:15-Love of Life	6:30-Those Two	1
11:30-Search for Tomorrow	6:45-News Car'van	1
12:00-12 O'clock, Whistle	7:00-RCA Show	1
12:15-News	7:30-My Friend Irma	2
12:30-Garry Moore	8:00-Farm Facts	2
1:00-To be ann.	8:30-Racket Sq'd	3
1:30-Guid. Light	9:00-Boxing	3
1:45-To be ann.	9:45-Greatest Fights	7
2:00-Big Payoff	10:00-Reporters' Digest	9
2:30-Mike & Buff	10:15-Football	9
3:00-Kate Smith	10:30-Life is Worth Living	9
3:30-United Nations	11:00-Robert Montgomery	1
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 13.		
12:30-To be ann.	6:00-20 Questions	1
4:00-Industry on Parade	6:30-Cisco Kid	1
4:15-This Week in Pictures	7:00-All Star Revue	1
4:30-Roy Rogers	8:00-Show of Shows	1
5:00-Strike it Rich	9:30-Hit Parade	1
5:30-This is Your Life	10:00-Sports	1
	10:15-Wrestling	1
	11:00-Film Theater	1

In 1952, viewers had a range of choices on WOI-TV (Ames)—from *Racket Squad* to *Farm Facts*, *Magic Window* to *Captain Video*, *Guiding Light* to *Ask Washington*, *Kate Smith* to *Roy Rogers*.



The Russell H. Schwartz family, above, and "hundreds of [other] families in Davenport and the Quad-cities have been watching test patterns on Station WOC-TV for the past month," says the *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, October 18, 1949 in a 24-page "television section." Davenporters waited "with happy anticipation for the beginning of regular programs" on October 31. Across the nation, Americans were poised for the arrival of television in their communities. See map on back cover for U.S. cities with stations four months later.

adults'. No program was useful unless it was saleable." That economic reality was tempered by the thrill of working live and the creative freedom of "working in a new medium that had not yet found all the answers, set its boundaries, defined its terms," as the director of an NBC local affiliate wrote in 1987. "Ideas and formats were not yet frozen, and the clichés of the business had not yet been manufactured."

Nevertheless, there were four main ingredients for producing a successful locally produced children's television show in the 1950s: puppets, cartoons, audience participation, and an adult host. Economic considerations, technological constraints, children's radio-show formulas, and the success of national network

children's shows joined forces to make two or three of these ingredients inevitable in every local children's show.

PUPPETS were one important ingredient for success in early children's programming. Radio's Edgar Bergen and his dummies Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd had popularized the puppet-act format for years. Once the *Howdy Doody Show* (originally *Puppet Playhouse*) and *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie* (hosted by former Iowa teacher and radio announcer Fran Allison) demonstrated the enormous success of using puppets in television, these shows were imitated nationwide.

Puppets made good sense for a local station



constrained by tight budgets and heavy cameras that didn't easily move to other settings. Puppets and puppet sets could be constructed cheaply, and only one person would have to be hired to make several puppets come alive. Even better, that person might also double as the show's host.

In Iowa, one of the first, longest running, and best-loved of the local children's shows was *The House with the Magic Window*, produced by WOI-TV of Ames beginning in 1951. Described by host Betty Lou Varnum as a "very gentle, friendly, accepting kind of program," it incorporated three main puppets; Catrina Crocodile, Gregory Lion, and Dusty Unicorn in its unrehearsed, unscripted dialogues. Varnum recently explained that WOI "didn't have a line in the budget for puppets—it was all volunteer." Most of the volunteers, including production manager Ed Weiss and educational broadcast director Red Varnum, the executive producer, and a publicity director, were part of WOI's management team.

Perhaps the best-known puppet character in Iowa was a dog named Floppy (so much so that in 1983 *Des Moines Register's* "Iowa Boy," columnist Chuck Offenberger, would declare Floppy recognition to be part of his "residency test . . . [of] questions every real Iowan should

be able to answer"). Floppy made his first appearance in 1957 on WHO-TV's *Pet Corner*, a show sponsored by the Des Moines Animal Rescue League to find homes for unwanted pets and to teach pet care, where he was originally called "Mr. Dog." Creating Floppy was a collaborative effort by the show's host, Duane Ellett, who carved the head from balsa wood in his home workshop; Ellett's wife, Lois, who sewed the body; and Ellett's mother-in-law, Cora Nystrom, who knit the bright red sweater Floppy wore even on the muggiest of Iowa State Fair days. *Pet Corner* was canceled, but Ellett and Floppy were offered their own children's show later in 1957, called *The Cartoon Shop*.

CARTOONS and film shorts were another necessary ingredient for locally produced children's programming, especially after Hanna-Barbera pioneered partial animation techniques using fewer drawings and repeated backgrounds, which made cartoon production far cheaper. As industry chronicler George Woolery observed, cartoons were "routinely dropped in a multi-purpose format which fused many elements too costly to produce as separate programs



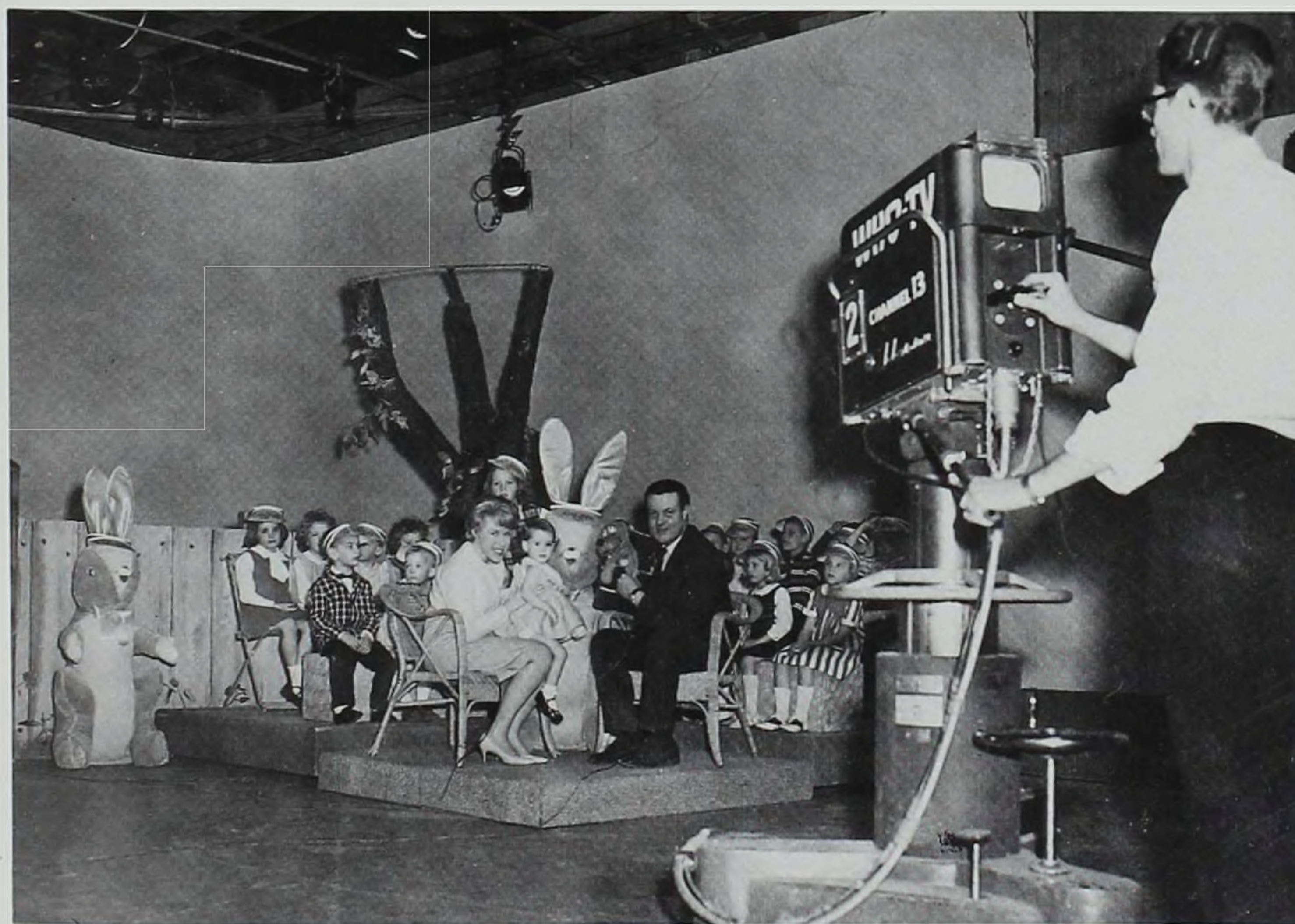
SHSI (PHOTO BY CHUCK GREINER)

Duane Ellett's puppet family. From left, Uncle Taffy, Standeen, Floppy, Matilda the Bookworm, Scary Mary, and The Inspector (whose earlier career was introducing Mr. Magoo cartoons on Ellett's show).

locally . . . the cartoons were seen between the games, songs, storytelling, crafts, and contests. . . . Nothing that would unduly tax the interest or attention span of a viewer." Ernie Mims, a.k.a. Captain Ernie of Davenport's WOC-TV's *Captain Ernie's Show Boat*, produced from 1964 to 1974, called cartoons his show's "main product."

Unfortunately, there were only a few animated film packages available at the time for distribution, and as a result, the same cartoons were repeated over and over again. In 1987, Duane Ellett explained his rationale for the redundancy: "People say, 'why don't you get some new cartoons?' and our theory is, keep using the same cartoons and bringing new children along. It's a lot more economical that way."

Despite the limited cartoon availability, Iowa children's shows did not all use the same pack-



DUANE ELLETT COLLECTION, SHSI (DES MOINES)

Heavy cameras, inexpensive sets, and lots of young guests typified locally produced children's shows. This set was used by Duane Ellett and Floppy in the mid-1960s.



Duane Ellett's puppet family. From left, Uncle Taffy, Standeen, Floppy, Matilda the Bookworm, Scary Mary, and The Inspector (whose earlier career was introducing Mr. Magoo cartoons on Ellett's show).

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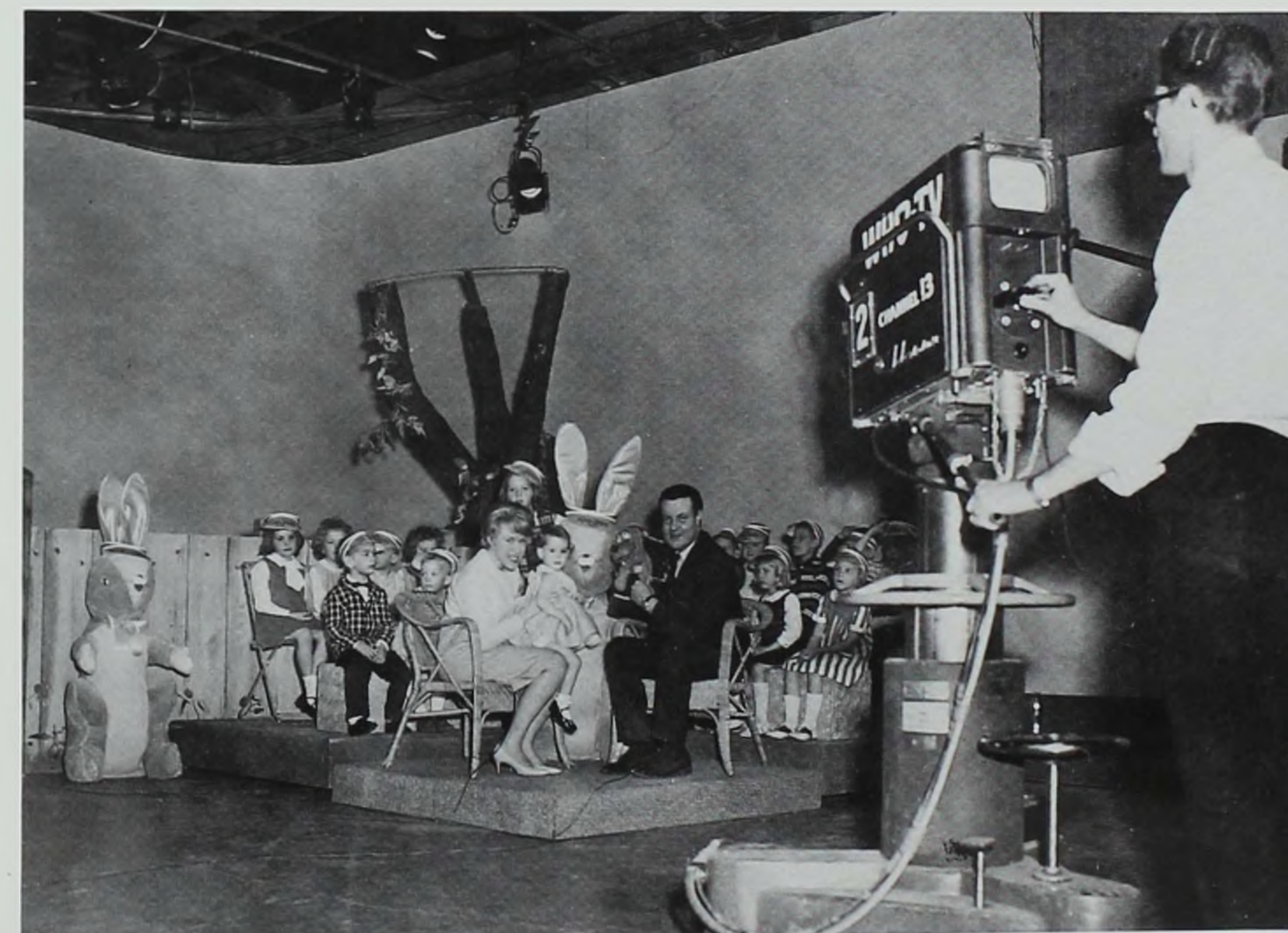
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As a member of the

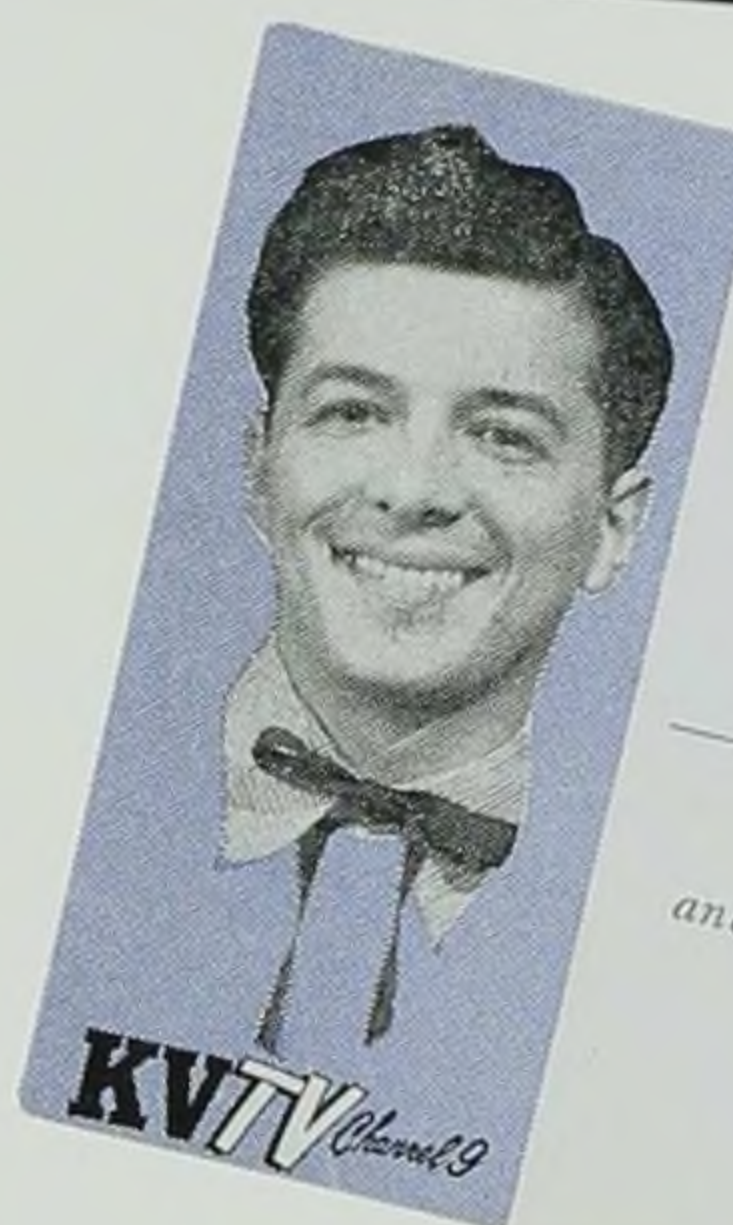
KVTV
Channel 9

Canyon Kid Club

I agree

1. To obey my Father and Mother
2. To observe all safety rules
3. To attend church regularly
4. To always be a good sport
5. To be a good citizen
6. To always be honest

Signed _____



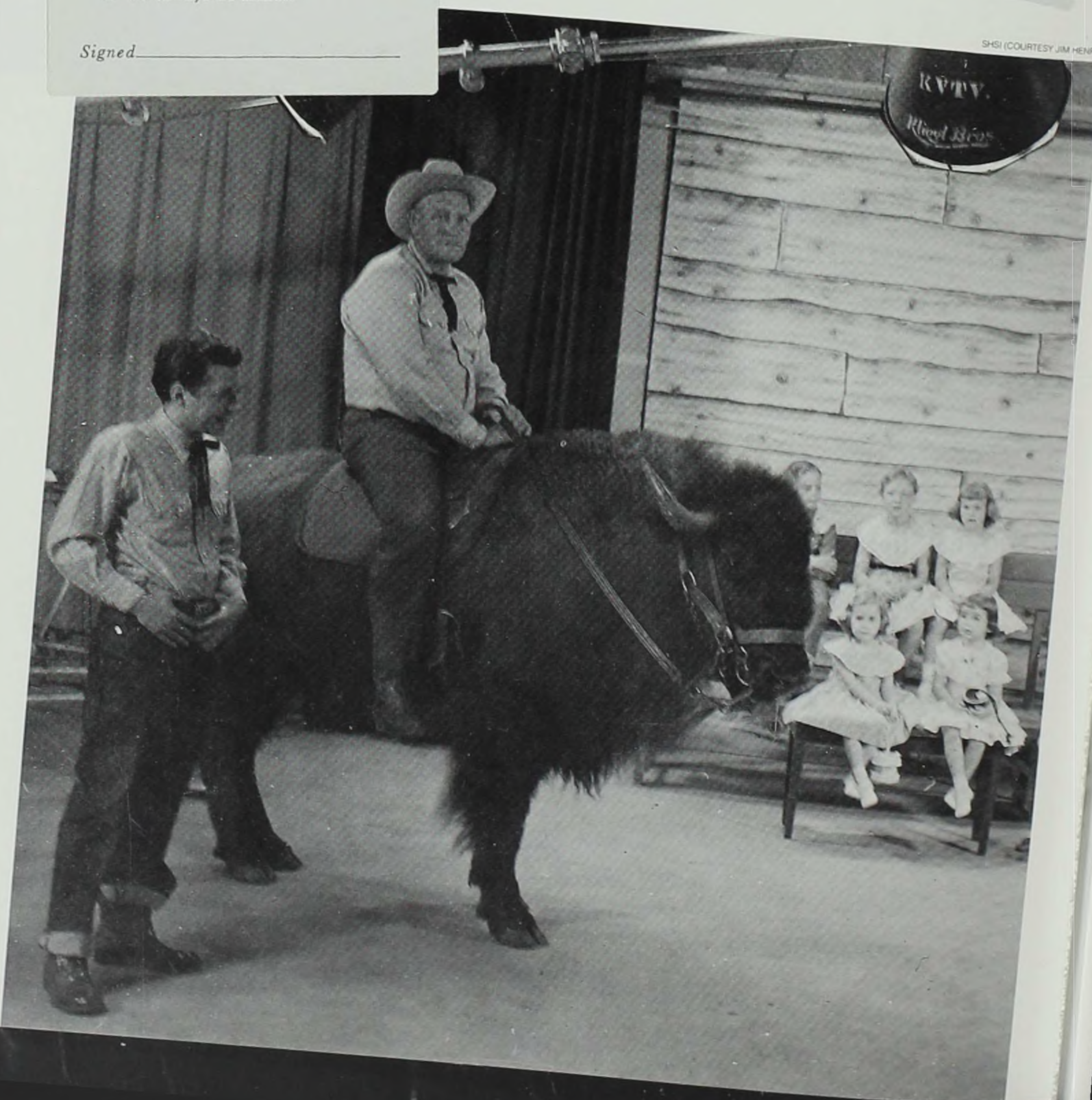
KIDS CORNER
Canyon Kid
CLUB

This is to certify that

is a member in good standing of the
CANYON KID CLUB
and is entitled to all the rights and privileges
that go with full membership.

Canyon Kid
Signature.
SIOUX CITY, IOWA

SHS (COURTESY JIM HENRY)



Opposite: Canyon Kid membership card and, below, a "special guest." Once a week the children could bring pets on the show; Jim Henry recalls the time a child's raccoon ate another child's turtle. So goes live TV.

ages. Betty Lou Varnum's *Magic Window* showed only non-violent cartoon shorts like *Simon in the Land of Chalk Drawings* and black and white film shorts of *Tales from the Riverbank*. Host Varnum recently explained, "I turned down some awfully popular cartoons" because they were too violent or taught children negative stereotypes. Beginning in 1954, KTIV-TV of Sioux City used Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon movie serials from the 1930s as the basis for their *Commander 4* program, which featured local host Red Quilleash dressed as a futuristic space pilot. Quilleash appeared on a stage set of flashing lights, introduced the episode, and read viewer mail.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION was perhaps the strongest and most unique draw to local kids' shows. As Jim Henry, Sioux City KVTU's "Canyon Kid," recently reflected, in "television's early years . . . there was no difference between local television and network television. . . . I mean, you were on television . . . and it didn't make any difference if you were coming from New York or from Sioux City. Wherever it was, they were impressed."

Sioux City-area children visited Canyon Kid's show on their birthday, or with their scout troop, other organizations, friends, or family. On Tuesdays they brought their pets to share with the television audience. On Wednesdays, they participated in Canyon's drawing contest on the set and at home, and on Thursdays, children made their debuts singing, dancing, and playing instruments. Some hoped to use the appearance as a springboard to other appearances and future fame (and some, like rocker Tommy Bolin, succeeded). Henry estimates that over 70,000 appearances were made by Sioux City-area children, some visiting the show six or seven times.

The most famous (or infamous) form of audience participation on *The Floppy Show*

occurred towards the end of each show when the children in the studio were invited to share their best (or worst) jokes with Floppy, "beep" his nose, and perhaps give him a kiss. Host Duane Ellett and Floppy patiently suffered through countless renditions of "Why did the man put the car in the oven? Because he wanted a hot rod!" and "What is the biggest pencil in the world? Pennsylvania!" They always responded with a hearty laugh and a positive comment like, "That was a good one, honey."

After a number of years of the same jokes, Ellett tried to "retire" some of the worst of them to the "Riddle Hall of Fame." He recalled that it was a disaster: "I learned my lesson. I would try to get some of the kids to change their riddle and they would cry. So I gave up and decided to let kids be kids."

In a recent interview with IPTV, Ernie Mims of Davenport station WOC-TV's *Captain Ernie's Show Boat* remembered that having local children on the show was an important part of its success. The show "provided a vehicle for youngsters and kids to be on TV," and allowed for local (though short-lived) fame, Mims explained. "They could say, 'Hey Billy, I'm going to be on *Captain Ernie's* with the cub scouts so be sure to watch.'"

Tied to the idea of audience participation was the role that each show's host played in the community outside of the show itself. Canyon Kid appeared at small-town celebrations, county fairs, schools, hospitals, and charitable events, and he always drew a crowd. Floppy and Duane Ellett made annual appearances at the Iowa State Fair, as well as at hundreds of town centennials and other local celebrations. The participation was thus two-way: children could visit their local TV heroes by appearing on their favorite show, and the hosts and puppets would visit children on the other side of the screen, in their own communities, as well.

Not all successful shows used audience participation. *Magic Window* did not include visits by children viewers, partially because of the constraints of the facilities, but mostly because Betty Lou Varnum wanted each child viewer to receive her undivided attention. "For that half-hour of the show," she explained, "each child

Floppy tours Iowa! Riding inside this well-traveled suitcase, Floppy made up to fifty personal appearances a year, including (clockwise, from top left) 1966 Boone speedway; 1984 Iowa State Fair; Oskaloosa mall celebration (where he shared billing with Harold Hughes, former governor and U.S. senator); 1966 Pella Tulip Festival; Emmetsburg celebration; and Blank Children's Hospital in Des Moines, 1985.



UNLESS NOTED, ELLETT COLLECTION (DES MOINES); COLOR PHOTOS BY CHUCK GREINER

ROYALTY REGNS — Visit With The Many Queens From Throughout The State
1976 Miss Shamrock
Colleen Schumy

Glamorous Miss Shamrock Pageant
Friday, March 18
7:30 p.m.
Corrigan Hall
Chairmanship of Kiwanis Club

SATURDAY, MARCH 19th - 1 p.m.
Famous St. Patrick's Day Parade
Downtown Emmetsburg

Emmetsburg's 17th Annual St. Patrick's Day CELEBRATION

March 18 - 19 - 20

Drawing for \$1,000 Bill
1st Donation
Mr. and Mrs. Desmond O'Walley
Nigallary From Ireland

Dave Nize
M.C. For Miss Shamrock Pageant

Colleen O'Callaghan
New Lines Western Irish Airlines

FREE Kid's Show
11 Hour After Parade
at Iowa Theatre
Sponsored by Emmetsburg Heads Up
TEEN DANCE
Featuring the "Kite" Band
Saturday at Tommy McLean Farm
9 p.m. to 12

FREE "Floppy" Show
Featuring W.B.B.'s Show (10:00)
Saturday - 1:00 at the Jr. High Auditorium
Sponsored by St. Patrick's Day Association

SATURDAY NIGHT BANQUET
6 p.m. - March 19
Emmetsburg Country Club
Sponsored By The Emmetsburg St. Patrick's Association
Write or Call St. Patrick's Day's
Phone 832-4326, Emmetsburg, Iowa 50526
For Tickets or Information

Pale Alto County Gun Club
"All Meat Priced"
Trap Shoot
At Sportsman's Park
Sunday at 1:00 p.m.

BINGO
Saturday
2 to 5
St. Thomas Hall
Chairmanship of Progress Club

Home Talent Show
Sunday, March 20th - 2 p.m.
Corrigan Hall
Entertainment From All Ages
For All Ages
Under Chairmanship of Cylinder Lions Club



SHS (COURTESY WHO-TV)



ATPIC MALL

Oskaloosa, Iowa
Grand Opening

Oct. 12, 13, 14

Special Guests



Harold Hughes
Sat. Oct. 14 at 2:30 P.M.



Duane Ellett & Floppy
Oct. 13 at 4:00 P.M.

GRAND PRIZE

FAIRMONT FUTURA 1979 RED FORD

Many Other Prizes Also!

Register At Each Store

CARNIVAL

BANDS

FREE

PEPSI

HOT DOGS

EVERYDAY

was at the center of my attention. I wanted them to feel that I was speaking directly to each one of them."

THE FOURTH INGREDIENT used in successful children's television programs of the 1950s was an adult host. In retrospect, many of the hosts of local children's shows seem unlikely choices. Few of them had had any kind of training in working with children, and most were radio announcers and technicians "temporarily" assigned to take over the new kids' show on the local TV station.

Jack Kuney, a producer of children's shows for CBS, recalled cynically that local kids'

shows were "usually hosted by some kind of father figure with little interest in the needs or wants of children. He was usually an actor/announcer of limited talent. . . . Producers created a whole new panoply of authority figures to supply banal programs for kids. There were Captains, Admirals, Circus Ringmasters, Policemen, Firemen, Canadian Mounties, Foreign Legionnaires, and lots of clowns and cowboys. Most of them were salesmen, and program hosts secondarily. They were neither emotionally or educationally prepared to be the TV Pied Pipers of America's children."

In the case of Iowa's children's shows, Kuney's observations about the lack of train-



"Canyon Kid" Jim Henry interviews Hoot Gibson, circa 1953. Cowboys were standard fare on many children's shows, like Henry's in Sioux City, Iowa.



Host Betty Lou Varnum with puppet on *Magic Window* studio set in mid-1950s. The alphabet on the wall behind her is indicative of the more educational content of Varnum's WOI-TV show.

SHS (COURTESY WOI-TV)



Duane Ellett began his broadcasting career as the singing "Ghost Rider" on WHO-Radio's *Iowa Barn Dance Frolic*. Photo circa 1950.

ing of hosts are, on the whole, accurate. His judgment about their abilities and talents, however, seems harsh and unfair in light of the fondness and deep loyalty felt by thousands of Iowans who grew up with the hosts and their puppet friends as daily "visitors" in their homes by way of the television screen.

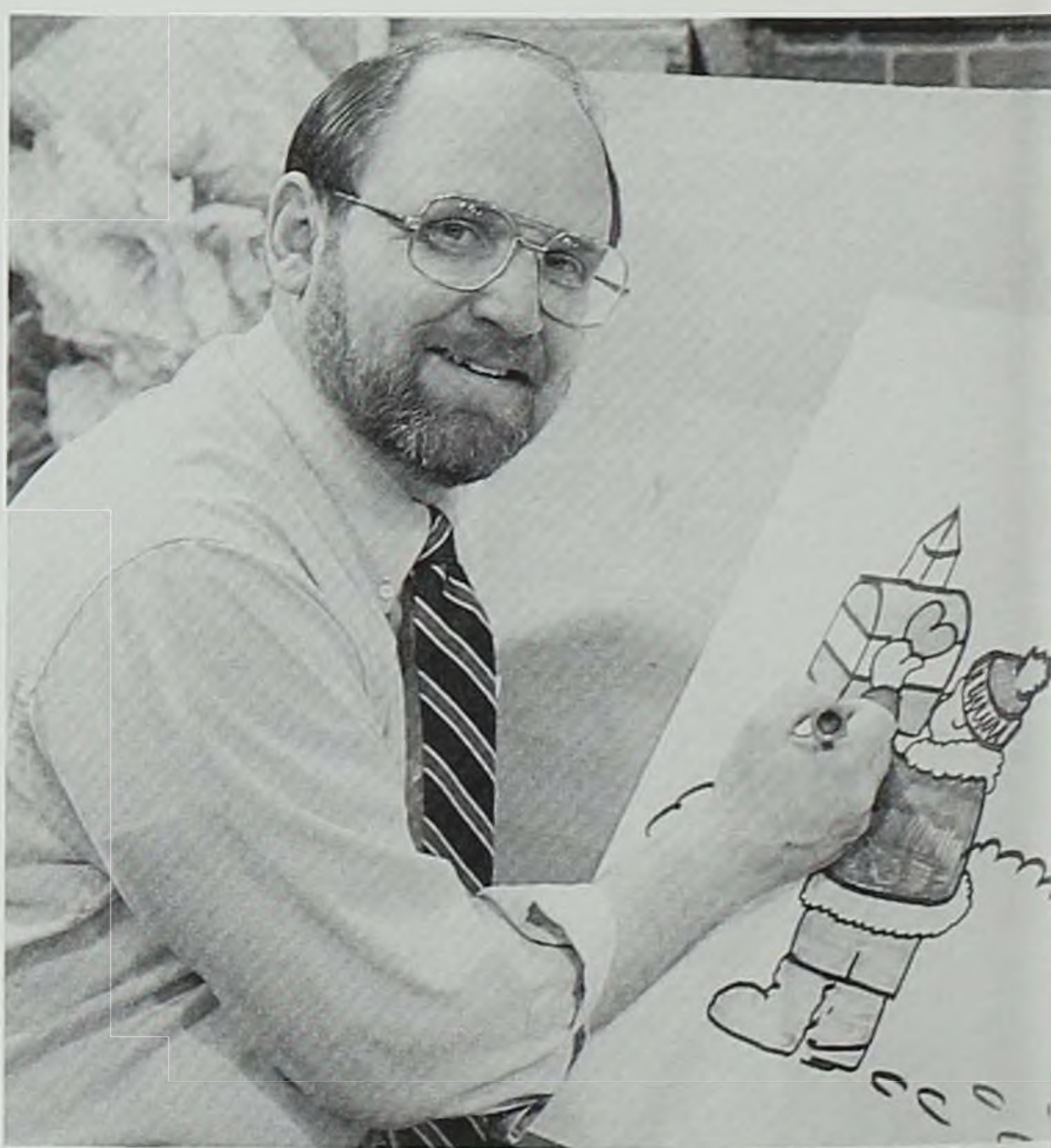
Jim Henry was active in the Sioux City Community Theater when KVTU came to Sioux City in 1953 and began looking for someone to host a kids' show. The station manager asked Henry to recommend someone. Henry could think of no one, but, as he recently recollected, the manager responded, "How about you? Why don't you do it? I mean, you could probably do this." Henry explained, "You'll have to understand that this was brand new. . . . Nobody had any experience here, whatsoever. . . . [The manager] knew as much about children's programming as I did. And so I said, 'Sure.'" Henry chose a western persona "because it was the easiest costume," and went to work planning the show's clubhouse format and set.

Duane Ellett originally wanted to be a lawyer, and was attending Drake University when a radio journalism class interested him

in broadcasting. He took a job at WHO Radio in 1947, playing the guitar and singing as "The Ghost Rider" on *Iowa Barn Dance Frolic*. By 1957, he was involved in WHO's television production with *Pet Corner*, the show for which Floppy was created.

Betty Lou Varnum is a notable exception in terms of her training. When Varnum was asked to interview for the show, she was a high school English teacher in Wisconsin, with both training and experience in education. Her background helps to explain the higher educational content of *Magic Window* compared to other local children's shows.

While most hosts had nearly complete freedom in choosing the topics and dialogues for their shows, one locally produced show stands in contrast to the free-wheeling, unscripted conversations on shows like *Floppy* or even *Magic Window*. *Romper Room* was a nation-wide program with a different teacher/host for each local area. The show's originators in Baltimore scripted everything from the teacher-host's appearance to the show's out-



SHSI (COURTESY WOI-TV)

"Mr. Fred" Kalamaja was a production manager, puppeteer, and artist on *The House with the Magic Window*. He taught children how to draw pictures by starting with simple shapes. The tissue paper flowers in background were a typical craft project.

DR. MAX



SHSI (IOWA CITY)

This has been my 1961-62 Important Book.
I have tried to keep it neat and clean and
up to date. I will treasure it and keep it
always to remember my childhood in the
years to come.

My Signature.

My Important Book

DR. MAX RULES FOR THE DAY

1. Brush my teeth
2. Be neat and tidy
3. Clean up my plate
4. Say my prayers at night
5. Fingernails clean
6. Be kind to others and animals
7. Go to Sunday School or church of
my choice
8. Play safe always
9. Obey Mom and Dad or Guardian
10. Work hard at school
11. Read lots of good books

I AM A GOOD TRAVEL PAL

Souvenir book from *The Dr. Max Show*
urged young viewers to do *all* the right things.

line and topic. And then, of course, there were the *Romper Room* brand toys, such as hobby horses that the children played with on the show and viewers could purchase in their local toy store. (One grassroots watchdog group, Action for Children's Television, in 1969 found that 16½ minutes of the 30-minute *Romper Room* broadcast comprised "one long commercial for *Romper Room* products.")

Even *Magic Window* had its constraints. While host Betty Lou Varnum was given some freedom in regards to program content, her

pregnancy was carefully concealed on the show with a long dark cape and hoop skirt, allegedly made for her by the little people in the magic forest.

E DUCATION WAS NOT the ultimate goal of most of the locally produced children's programming. Certainly, *The House with the Magic Window* had a reputation of having more educational content than most shows, with its craft activities, pup-



HEART BEATS
ONE HUNDRED
THOUSAND, EIGHT
HUNDRED TIMES

LET'S
NOT FORGET
THE HARDWORKING
DIGESTIVE
SYSTEM

I'M
TAKING
MY TUMMY
OUT TO
LUNCH

EVERY SECOND
OF THE DAY TEN
MILLION RED BLOOD
CELLS ARE DESTROYED
AND REPLACED

HEART PUMPS
FOUR THOUSAND
GALLONS OF
BLOOD

23,240
BREATHS
IN 24
HOURS

BLOOD COURSES
THROUGH ONE HUNDRED
THOUSAND MILES OF
BLOOD VESSELS

YOUR EYES
USE UP $\frac{1}{4}$ OF
YOUR NERVOUS
ENERGY

On *The Floppytown Gazette* weekend show (1982–1987), Ellett used all his puppets and drew cartoon posters like this one to present information for his young audience. Above: the *Gazette* set.

DUANE ELLETT COLLECTION, SHSI (DES MOINES)

pets, and educational film shorts from *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Nevertheless, most Iowa children's shows tried to serve some small educational function. As "Canyon Kid" Jim Henry explained, the main purpose of "this show, in my mind, was to entertain the children. . . . If we could give them some information along the line, if we could give them educational ideas, that's swell, that was fine." Part of the membership package for the Canyon Kid Club included a membership card that included what Henry described as "hints on how to get along in the world. You know,

be kind to your friends . . . obey your mother and father . . . go to church."

"Dr. Max" Hahn of Cedar Rapids's WMT-TV's *The Dr. Max Show* handed out booklets with space for children to write "important notes and messages I receive each day from Dr. Max" and "Dr. Max Rules For the Day," which included "brush my teeth . . . finger-nails clean . . . go to Sunday School or church of my choice . . . read lots of good books." Commander 4 from KTIV in Sioux City sent his fans cards with bicycle safety tips and rules for living. (First though, the cards had to be

decoded with a special device from "Space Legion Headquarters.")

In Des Moines, Floppy's 1982-1987 weekend show was *The Floppytown Gazette*. In this show, Ellett used all his puppet characters and added educational information. In between cartoons, Floppy, Matilda the Bookworm (who championed reading), Scary Mary, Standeen (Floppy's stand-in), Uncle Taffy, and the Inspector explored everything from skateboard safety and Halloween do's and don'ts to the human body and weather facts.

Despite the educational components, producers of children's shows on commercial stations generally believed that they needed primarily to entertain in order to hold their audiences. Increasingly, however, educators and parents wondered whether programming for the entertainment of children was at odds with programming to educate children. In 1952, this question would provide impetus for a purely educational network of stations to be broadcast across Iowa. As proposed in a report to the governor by the Joint Committee on Educational Television, the network would be funded by the state and by grants. This effort was tabled in 1953, but would be resurrected in the 1965 legislative session, leading to the Iowa Public Broadcasting Network in 1968 (now the Iowa Public Television Network).

AMIDST THESE DEVELOPMENTS, and as the numbers of television sets increased, an acrimonious national debate was gaining heat. The fields of education, psychology, sociology, mass communication, and journalism, as well as the popular press, were involved in a fractious discourse about television. This debate reaches into the present, with many of its points of conflict unresolved. At issue are the effects of TV viewing on the attitudes and behaviors of children and families, and the question of responsibility for such effects.

Early literature on the effects of television suggested that TV would have a positive effect on children and families. One of the earliest studies was a qualitative study by psychologist Thomas Coffin in 1948. He reported that families with TVs spent more time together, while families without TVs spent more time apart,

engaged in out-of-home activities. Another early study appeared in *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1949. The study's interview data suggested that TV brought families together, bridged generation gaps, and formed new friendships. The authors concluded that TV was "stimulating new interests within the family, a new awareness of the family unit, and enlarging the immediate circle of social relationships."

The popular press played on this image, referring to television as "a member of the family." Architectural and women's magazines created the perfect space in the home for this "new member"—the "family room."

Des Moines Register "Over the Coffee" columnist Harlan Miller was less enthusiastic: "Frankly, I'm inclined to doubt rumors that the TV set is a new magnet that hugs the whole family together around the hearthstone," he wrote in 1950. "My theory is that lots of young people, if they don't find enough privacy around the TV set, will go where they can neck."

At the same time, researchers were questioning the quality of the time families spent together in front of the TV. A 1950 study by Edward McDonagh that appeared in *Sociology and Social Research* cautioned, "The television family during the evening hours is changing from a social group characterized by conversation to an audience sitting in the semidarkness and silently gazing at their commercially sponsored entertainment via television."

Education journals raised concerns about how television would affect children's academic performance. One 1950 journal article cited complaints by parents of "over stimulating experiences which lead to sleepless nights and fatigued eyes" and the experience of a teacher who left the field "since she finds that she cannot compete with the antics of the favored comedians" and that school subjects were "no match for the adventure and excitement of the cowboy programs." This particular study, however, argued that TV programming was not to blame for such a state of affairs; rather, it was lack of parental control of television viewing that was at fault.

Others worried that the popularity of television would mean the death of print literacy,

sparking a round of studies comparing media consumption "before television" to "after television." One of these studies, a 1960 State University of Iowa dissertation, compared survey data of Des Moines children taken eight weeks before WOI-TV began its first broadcasts to survey data from a similar sample eight years after the first broadcast. The study found that overall consumption of mass media had increased dramatically, with television dominating the media choices. Although motion picture attendance and radio listening were down, newspaper reading was not significantly affected, and leisure book reading had actually increased.

As juvenile delinquency became a national obsession in the 1950s, television was inevitably implicated in the moral ruin of youth, just as dime novels, radio, and motion pictures had been in the past. Yet some parents argued that TV helped to keep their children off the streets and out of trouble. By the mid-1950s, public debate over TV and juvenile delinquency culminated in a United States Senate subcommittee, special reports, and calls for FCC regulation.

By 1962, FCC chairman Newton Minow was calling television a "vast wasteland" that was "just as tasteless, just as nourishing as dishwater." Grassroots movements were growing that would eventually lead to projects like the Children's Television Workshop (CTW), and shows like CTN's *Sesame Street*.

ACTUALLY, *Sesame Street* modeled parts of its format on two successful programs broadcast by Des Moines Channel 11 (KDPS). The station was owned by the Des Moines school district, then sold to the state of Iowa in 1969. KDPS won a federal grant in 1967 to produce a three-hour daily block of children's programming Monday through Friday. The block was divided into segments for each grade level, first through sixth, and each section was coordinated with the curriculum of the Des Moines schools.

The show, named *KiDiPuS Land* for the station's call letters, was designed to create active rather than passive viewers. Cameraman Bob

McCloskey recently recalled that "kids were making things, doing things, learning things, not just sitting there." Program Manager Mike LaBonia explained that "we wanted to prompt kids to do things for themselves. Ironically, we wanted them to turn the television off and go try all the things they learned about."

Because the show was not required viewing for Des Moines students, however, it couldn't be dry, calling for experimentation with the elusive, perfect mix of education and entertainment. The show used a varied format of educational film shorts, puppets, and field trips. It was popular among children; sixteen thousand sent in requests to be members of the "KiDiPuS Club."

In the following year, 1968, Channel 11 (then KDIN after it was sold to the state) won a Ford Foundation grant to continue the block concept programming for Saturday as well as weekdays. The Saturday show was called *Volume See*, and it was seen not only in Des Moines, but also in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Hershey, Pennsylvania; Austin, Texas; and Roanoke, Virginia. Each of the other four member stations submitted segments to be aired on the show in addition to the segments produced in Des Moines and the educational films. The station in Hershey submitted segments on puppet-making, featuring soon-to-be-discovered Muppeteer Jim Henson and Henson's early versions of *Sesame Street* characters Bert, Ernie, and Kermit.

Fred Rogers (who would become "Mr. Rogers" of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*) was at that time working at Pittsburgh educational station WQED, was asked to host *Volume See* but turned down the offer. Instead, KDIN chose a talented African-American named Carl Williams, who played the straight man against such characters as Buford the Dragon, Cy the Eye, a swami, and two acrobatic writers. Although the shows were acclaimed, when the grant sources dried up, the station could no longer afford to produce such large blocks of children's programs, and *KiDiPuS Land* and *Volume See* were canceled. By that time, however, national educational shows like *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* were being produced and distributed by public television networks. When *Sesame Street* was first in produc-

tion, the directors not only interviewed Carl Williams for a role, but also talked to *Volume See's* producers about their successful format and methods.

In fact, Iowa was an even earlier leader in educational television. From 1932 to 1939, the State University of Iowa's station W9XK conducted limited educational broadcasting and technical experimentation. The station transmitted a total of 389 programs on nearly everything from art to shorthand, drama to botany, using a "scanning disc" instead of a picture tube.

In 1950, WOI-TV in Ames was established as an educational TV station that ostensibly would be insulated from the demands of commercial TV. WOI was the first and for several years the only station of its kind in the nation and "literally pioneered educational television for the rest of the nation," stated the Iowa Joint Committee on Educational Television in its 1952 report to the governor. "Iowa can be proud to have been the mecca of educational television." WOI not only produced the nation's longest-running children's show, *The House with the Magic Window*, but also many other educational children's shows like *Iowa TV Schooltime* which brought art and music instruction to children whose small school districts could not provide such instruction in school, as well as programs on science and geography.

WOI-TV was sold in 1994, bringing many changes at the station, including the cancellation of Betty Lou Varnum's *The House with the Magic Window*, one of the nation's last remaining locally produced shows for kids.

IN IOWA, locally produced children's shows on commercial stations did not face public debate on their quality; instead their enemy was market forces. As the broadcasting day was extended and program schedules became more complex, children's shows were neglected completely or moved to less desirable time slots. As those time slots became lucrative for adult programming, and old network shows became cheaply available through syndication, the children's shows were shoved on to the Saturday morning lineup or canceled.

The Floppy Show is a prime example of this

pattern. In 1984, WHO officials decided to cancel *Floppy* from its 3:00 p.m. time slot due to decreasing ratings, competition from new independent cable stations, and changing viewer's habits. Although then-station manager William Jackson admitted that it was hard to cancel a show that had been part of the station's schedule for twenty-seven years, *Floppy* was replaced with *Love Boat* reruns "to become more competitive for the adult audience in the late afternoon." *Floppy* remained in the less desirable spots of 12:15-12:30 daily (*Duane and Friend*) and a thirty-minute show on weekends (*The Floppytown Gazette*), but these shows did not include the audience participation of the 3:00 show, and hence the notorious jokes were silenced.

Protests were organized and loyal fans picketed the WHO studio. One mother argued, "It's important to fight for good TV. Duane is a good role model," and a college student



Fans picket WHO-TV in September 1984 when *Floppy's* live afternoon show was preempted by *Love Boat* reruns. As programming became more competitive, locally produced shows—like Ellett's—which had once helped fill long hours of available air time, often lost out to nationally produced shows and reruns.

pleaded, "Floppy is important to a lot of people." It wasn't enough to bring Floppy back to his old slot and format. Ellett's comment on the cancellation was, "I've been in this business 38 years and you learn that there are peaks and valleys. You never know, Floppy may come back in all his splendor some afternoon, some year."

TODAY, most of the shows Iowa children watch are produced and distributed at the national level. One notable exception is the Iowa Public Television Network, which was born of a 1952 FCC regulation to reserve 242 channels in the broadcast spectrum for educational use only. This was "as significant and far-reaching in its implications as the Morrill Act of 1862 which created the Land Grant college system in the United States," according to a 1962 publication of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, & Welfare.

The advent of cable television has meant numerous choices for child viewers. At almost any time of day, a "channel-surfing" child might flip to a slick cartoon series produced by an international production giant like Walt Disney Studios, watch *Ninja Turtles* eat Domino's pizza, hear the classic strains of the *Sesame Street* theme or the newer "I love you, you love me . . ." of a certain notorious purple dinosaur named Barney, even find whole stations like Nickelodeon, the Disney Channel, and the Cartoon Network devoted to kids' shows and syndicated oldies. Indeed, many schools across Iowa and the nation begin their day with national television broadcasts from Whittle Communications' *Channel One*, a fast-paced news program with teenage hosts. What is harder to find, however, is the local, amateurish but lovable hosts and their puppet sidekicks. Local-access cable channels, howev-

er, can and do provide an avenue for such shows to reappear, and are an opportunity for children themselves to create, direct, and produce shows of their own.

What has not changed, however, is the continuing debate over the proper place of television in the lives of America's children and the effects of television on their behavior, with violence and passivity two particular areas of concern. This part of children's television history continues to be written, by tightening FCC regulations, by network producers, by researchers, by grassroots protest movements, and by parents and children themselves.

As children today spend more time watching TV than they do in school, playing with peers, or reading books, the words of then-FCC chair Newton Minow in 1961 on the age of television still ring true: "Just as history will decide whether the leaders of today's world employed the atom to destroy the world or rebuild it for mankind's benefit, so will history decide whether today's broadcasters employed their powerful voice to enrich the people or debase them." □

NOTE ON SOURCES

The author would like to thank State Historical Society of Iowa photo archivist Mary Bennett for her February 1994 oral history interview with "Canyon Kid" Jim Henry; Jerome Thompson, who curated the "Where's Floppy?" exhibit, for his research on Floppy and the Ellett Collection; the producers of IPTV's March 1994 broadcast of *TV We Grew Up On* for their helpful interviews and information on numerous local children's shows; Bob McCloskey and Mike LaBonia for their KDPS memories; Steve Kurtenback for WOI photos; and Betty Lou Varnum for her pleasant and helpful interview.

Secondary sources on children's television include Carmen Luke, *Constructing the Child Viewer: A History of the American Discourse on Television and Children 1950-1980* (New York, 1990); Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago, 1992); George Comstock, *The Evolution of American Television* (London, 1989); and George Woolery, *Children's Television: The First Thirty-five Years 1946-1981* (Metuchen, NJ, 1983).

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Information on Floppy was found in several *Des Moines Register* articles and the Duane Ellett Collection at the State Historical Society of Iowa (Des Moines), and a WHO-TV special, *Floppy: Thirty Years of Fun* (May 1987 broadcast).

An annotated copy of this article is held in the *Palimpsest* production files, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).

You can see Floppy and his sidekicks at the State Historical Building in Des Moines, Tuesdays-Sundays. The "Where's Floppy?" exhibit features puppets, photos, videotapes, and memorabilia from the Society's Duane Ellett Collection, some of which appear in this article.
